

F
589

B4W6

THE SETTLEMENT OF BELOIT, AS TYPICAL OF THE BEST WESTWARD MIGRATION OF THE AMERICAN STOCK

BY

HENRY M. WHITNEY, M. A.

Professor in Beloit College

[From Proceedings of The State Historical Society of Wisconsin, 1898]

MADISON

STATE HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF WISCONSIN

1899



Class F. 2.

Book B. 1.6.

THE SETTLEMENT OF BELOIT, AS TYPICAL OF THE
BEST WESTWARD MIGRATION OF THE
AMERICAN STOCK

BY
HENRY M. WHITNEY, M. A.
Professor in Beloit College

[From Proceedings of The State Historical Society of Wisconsin, 1898]

MADISON
STATE HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF WISCONSIN
1899

40146

THE SETTLEMENT OF BELOIT, AS TYPICAL OF THE BEST WESTWARD MIGRATION OF THE AMERICAN STOCK.¹

BY HENRY M. WHITNEY, M. A.

Externally, the settlement of Beloit was not so very different from what has been found in other parts of the State; but internally it had distinctive features, and those were such as may be called typical of the best pioneering work of the people of American stock. Beloit never went through the period of cowboy domination, with saloons as the chief ornaments of the streets, and the crack of the revolver as the chief diversifier of the monotony of daily life; indeed, it was a long time before the saloon was tolerated, and it has never had great prominence or influence. Beloit never had many people of the restless sort who come to pick up land as a speculation, selling out and moving westward as soon as they can get their price; such people, so far as they came there, on taking a good look at the situation, traveled on without stopping to invest. The pioneers of Beloit came to stay, and their children and grandchildren are still foremost in the life of the city, or have gone elsewhere because there came to them a call. Beloit had many of that class which endures the hardships and makes the sacrifices, spending their strength in the pioneer days,—perhaps, like Dr. Horace White, laying down their lives under the stress,—leaving the profits of the advancing prices and the enjoyment of the advancing comfort, to those who came in at a later day.

The Rock River valley having been opened to settlement by the Black Hawk War, population swarmed in. You know the charm of the whole valley through Rock county, the bold bluffs above Janesville, the projection of Big Hill into the expanse of

¹ Address delivered before the Historical Convention, at Madison, February 22, 1899.

prairie, and, lower yet, the location of Beloit, where the Rock is met by the Turtle, at what is now the state-line. The greater river comes down the narrower valley: the Turtle, using the valley of what was in geologic days a great river, draining a great geologic lake, comes westward from Delavan lake and empties its exceedingly various volume into the staid and uniform Rock. At the commanding corner, where the two lines of bluffs come together, is a place where a West Pointer would set an earthwork to command both valleys: indeed, perhaps it was the recognition of this strategic quality that made Major Philip Kearney buy a few city lots just there in the infant days of the village, and perhaps it was the Beloit spirit that made him give these lots with all cheerfulness when Beloit College was looking for a local habitation to add to its name. At the very corner the mound-builders had set a giant turtle, with his head toward the beautiful river scene: or perhaps only toward the fish of both streams and toward the long and shady ravine down which buffalo and deer loved to reach the river to drink; or, again, perhaps only so as to be able to keep one eye on the site of the future Janesville and the other on the sites of the future Rockton and Rockford: or perhaps to see that the state-line did not come any further up. I cannot undertake to answer for the motives of the mound-builders in shaping their totem at this commanding point, but I know that wandering Winnebagoes, long after the settlement of Beloit, came and took a look at their turtle; so, when private Abraham Lincoln went southward through the place, in returning from the surrender of Black Hawk, he found a Turtle Village, but it was not a white man's place. You may know that Beloit has the three types of prairie, the level on the north and south, — Rock and Winnebago prairies, — the rolling on the west, and the broken on the east. Fish were in the two streams in such numbers that they sometimes blocked the wheel of the settler's mill; the deer and the wild birds were equally abundant. Turtle Creek would furnish two small water-powers till the settlers could gather their means to dam the Rock. Then there was gravel, unlimited gravel, — six hundred feet or more, as we now know, — and that would appeal with immense force to the New Eng-

lander who had been toiling around the sandy end of Lake Michigan and then through the fathomless Chicago mud. Indeed, the first professor in Beloit College, struggling in Frink & Walker's stage through the hundred miles of mud from Chicago, at last, as the stage went down Roscoe hill, heard the crunch of gravel under the wheel; out went his head at the window, and he asked the driver how much farther it was to that place where he was to try to set a college in the prairie-grass. "Seven miles," said the driver, and the young professor took fresh courage, for he thought that it was an omen that the college, when founded, would never get entirely stalled.

But, to return: we must make out to see some picturesqueness in old Joseph Thiebault, the first white man known to have made Turtle Village his abode. He was a Frenchman trading with the Indians, and (for services rendered to General Scott as interpreter in negotiating, in 1833, a treaty by which the Winnebagoes ceded to the United States all their title to the territory between the lakes and the Mississippi) he claimed all the land lying about his cabin within "three looks." Even if he had two wives with a corresponding number of children, that is not counted a disadvantage nowadays, at least in the congress of the United States. I speak of Thiebault chiefly because he had a log-cabin, for, when Caleb Blodgett came, early in 1836, and for \$200 bought Thiebault's vast and rather dubious claim, the log-cabin, duly cleaned, became the abode of the settlers till they could build for themselves. It is not every community, even in the west, that can place its beginnings with so much exactness. Caleb Blodgett was a Vermonter by way of Ohio and New York, and he was, fortunately, a Beloit kind of man.

Now, let us go to New Hampshire, far north of the White Mountains, and within a few miles of the Canadian line: there, on an affluent of the Connecticut River, is the quaint old village of Colebrook. Those who lived there must have been a hardy race, fit for pioneering. In that village was a group of twelve men who felt that the world had for them something larger and nobler than little Colebrook could ever afford. They formed the New England Emigrating Company in October, 1836, appointed Dr. Horace White their agent, and sent

him across the country by such conveyance as he could hire or buy, to find them a western home. R. P. Crane and O. P. Bicknell pushed westward too, and the three, after looking in many places, saw the strategic value of Turtle village and fixed their choice. They bought one-third of the Blodgett claim and returned to Colebrook to gather up their families and their goods. It has been said that the life went out of Colebrook when they left: I should prefer to say that these men had the vision to see the future to which Colebrook was necessarily destined, and the will-power to get into the path of empire while they were physically fresh. I fear Colebrook would have been as completely overshadowed even if they had stayed. By mid-summer in 1837, the colonists were in their new abode and were breaking the wilderness to the service of man.

Dr. White's wife was from Bedford, at the other end of New Hampshire, and that connection brought to Turtle Village six families of equal sturdiness and value in determining the character of the town. The stamp of the settlement was at once so individual that its fame spread far and wide. The New England Settlement it was called, and it got plenty of abuse for its positive ideas, but also attracted many who liked those ideas and wanted to cast in their lot with such a people. L. G. Fisher, searching for a place, came to Watertown, heard of the New England Settlement, floated down the Rock till he reached it, and was there in time to be chairman of the committee to find a new name for the settlement. It was he who, starting with *Belle* and *Detroit*, evolved the present name.

I have given these fragments of early history, not as new to the historian, but as new to many of you and therefore necessary as a framework in which to set what I may be able to say of a more abstract nature.

Now the first thing that I want to say about my subject, the settlement of Beloit as representing the best westward migration of the American stock, is that these men, and those whom they drew in after them in the earliest days, had an immense amount of practical sagacity. They knew enough to get out of the shadow of the Great White Hills (although if they had staid they might now at last be keeping hotels and coining money at

White Mountain prices from the summer-resorters); they made no mistakes in the steps they took to obtain a location and to settle upon it; they knew the moral value of having gravel under their feet; they knew good land; they knew the value of a quarry, and of good oak-trees; they were attracted by the New England-like look of the country, and especially of the River Rock; they saw that the Rock River Valley must prosper if anything in this region could; they saw that it was a fit seat for empire. It was a piece of hardheaded business-sense to transplant themselves and their households to a place of so much promise; they saw that if they placed themselves at Beloit things must come their way.

And again, they were physically and morally robust. Some of us remember the Irish that came to New England after the potato-famine in 1845; they were often bent almost double, with hooked hands, waxy faces, and wolfish glances: many of them did not know what a sidewalk was for. It is the pride of New England that fifty years of American life have made excellent citizens of the grandchildren of those physical wrecks and mental dwarfs, but it took fifty years and the tremendous power of the New England civilization to do it. I suppose the Italian and the Chinese who come to us are the most enterprising of their class, but the class is low: assisted immigration has dumped some poor material of manhood upon our shores. But just as most of the Germans, the Norwegians, the Swedes, and the Scotch are selected stock, so the early settlers of Beloit were selected men and women; they might have prospered in Colebrook, in Bedford, or in the other places whence they came, but they wanted something better yet. They faced the wilderness bravely; they lived, in a way that now seems amusing, by barter and credit: later they had the beauties of wild-cat banking and the business depression of 1836-37 to make them realize what financial quicksands are.

And again, they had large ideas, and so laid broad foundations. They platted the village in 1838 with broad New England-like streets,—streets that a New Englander recognizes at once,—and they made College street the name of one of the choicest. It is an interesting fact that, when the committee, appointed a few

years later to choose a site for the proposed college of the state-line, had viewed all the suggested locations, they not only selected Beloit as the town, but hesitated only between two locations, both fronting on that same street.

It is evident that from the start they meant to have a college. As I have wondered why that was, I have seemed to see three reasons: 1. That they were that kind of men: that of course was the fundamental fact. 2. That, being that kind of men, they had felt the great distance of the one college of New Hampshire from any of their old homes, and they wanted the luxury of having one within five minutes' walk — indeed, the plan to place it at the distance of a ten minutes' walk was suppressed. 3. I think they had a seer-like vision of what was likely to happen to them and their children if they did not nurse the church and the school. Have you not felt the sadness of the sight when people, bright by early associations and bright by the attrition of new experience and new acquaintance, have settled down without recognizing that brightening and elevating influences must be carefully fostered about them, and, lacking these, have lost intelligence and spirituality, and their children have lost moral life as well? The West, with all its boasted superiority to the East, has many such cases of degeneration, and they have sometimes proved plague-spots in the body of the state. Now I believe that the Beloit pioneers saw that vision with sufficient clearness to make them want the college as well as the church, that they and their children might be saved from such a fate.

I said that they wanted also the church: they brought along a deacon on purpose. Before they got a church building they worshiped in a kitchen, and the prairie people came in ox-wagons to attend. They started a church-building, getting shingles in Racine on credit, hauling them across the country by ox-power, the driver sleeping under the wagon at night, and they honestly paid for the shingles in the spring. The church that they built was the most stately of the three Congregational churches existing in Wisconsin in 1844,—so stately, indeed, that it got into two editions of the American Encyclopedia, but it was not built by people of wealth, except the wealth of devo-

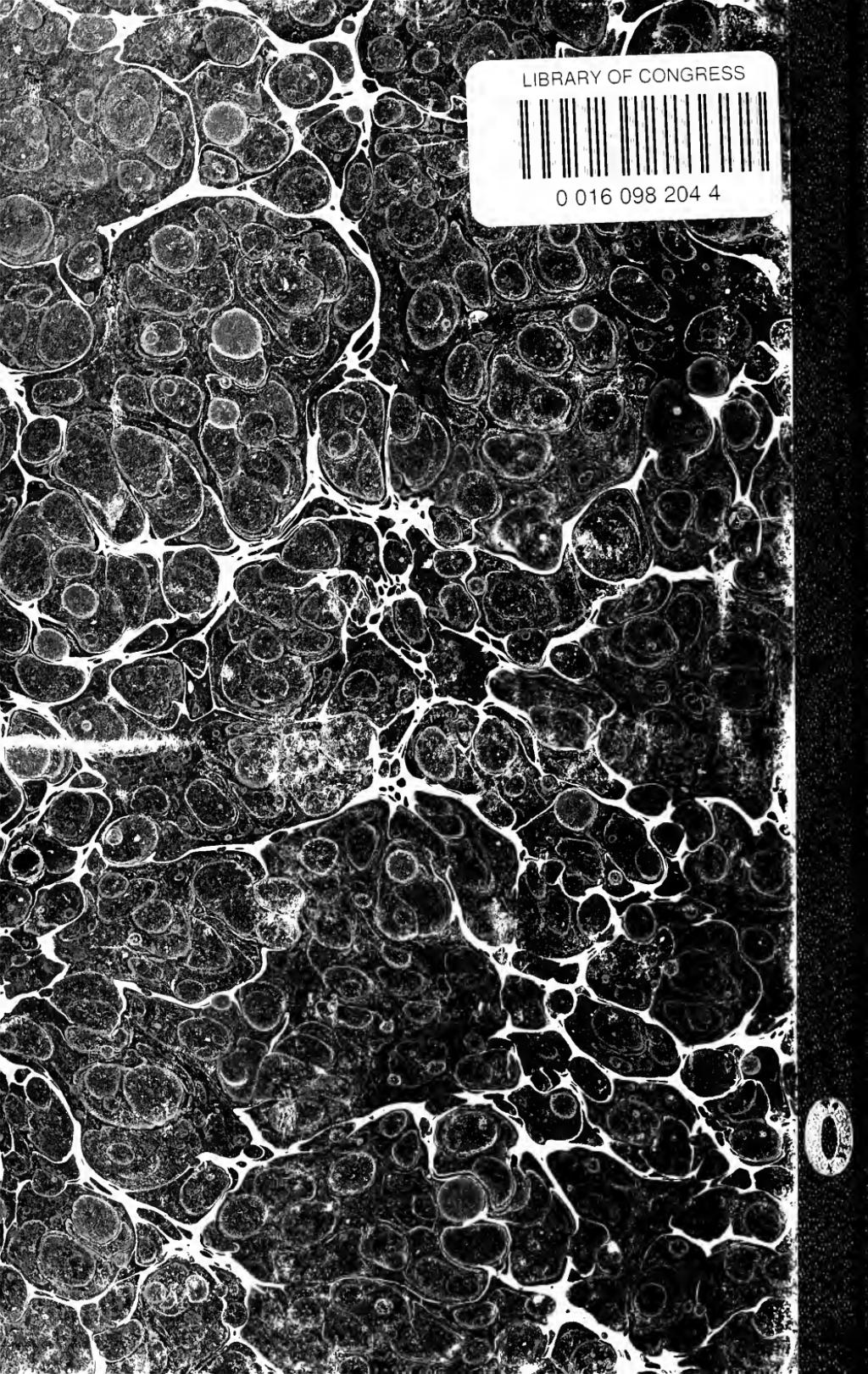
tion. It is an interesting illustration of their breadth of interest, that when the Congregational church of Madison undertook to erect a house of worship, the people of Beloit, hardly yet emerged from log-houses into houses made of the hard-wood product of their saw-mill, put their hands into their pockets deeply enough to get \$50 to help the folks up here.

They had also great tenacity of purpose. They had experiences that would have made many other towns give up the ghost. They made mistakes, as we strewed our way with errors all through the war with Spain; but they lived down their mistakes, as we hope sometime to see a happy issue of this dreadful Philippine mess. As with us, so with them, the way out was forward and upward. And, finally, they had great elevation of character. You remember that the Indian and the star on the coat-of-arms of Massachusetts are said to mean that the settlers of Massachusetts wanted the star of Bethlehem to shine over the shoulder of the red man whom they found here, to guide him on his way. I have sometimes wished that the motto of Wisconsin were something more elevating than *Forward*: one can at least read into it the sense of *upward*, for that was what many of them meant. Those Beloit settlers meant *upward* when they pressed *forward* from their homes a thousand miles away. They brought the New Hampshire and Vermont brand of civilization and religion, while the more southern parallels were being filled by people of the Connecticut and Massachusetts kind. That difference may be read all over Wisconsin whenever we come upon cities or towns established by people of American stock. They wanted to make a commonwealth that should be good and great. They had magnificent help from men of other nationalities, they had the good sense to coöperate with them wisely, and the two produced a state of which we all are proud.

The other day I was reading about the adoption of seals by various Massachusetts towns. The selectmen have aimed to have something significant of local history. Rutland uses the tree standing at the geographical center of the state. Gardner takes the figure of Sir Thomas Gardner, from whom the town was named: Brookfield pictures the burning

load of hay that the savages pushed against the very last house when they had destroyed all the rest of the ancient village.

Then I said, what representative seal shall we give to Beloit? I understood the significance of the badger for the whole commonwealth: he has a great nose for business; he does no harm if he is not molested, but can make life a burden for those who trouble him; he is remarkable for the skill and the effectiveness with which he scratches the earth. That will do very well for the badger, although we have to spiritualize his attributes a little to be wholly satisfied to have him stand for our state; we wish he could do something better than dig. Then I thought that the totem left by the Winnebagoes would not be so very bad for the seal of Beloit, for Beloit has as yet no seal. The public-library seal has at the center a yawning blank, and the turtle-totem is the thing to fill it. He is looking in the right direction, he is always on duty, he represents an animal that may be slow but is always safe; indeed, one of the race is fabled to have once outrun the speedy but unreliable hare. When our cities and towns follow the example of Massachusetts in this excellent matter of seals, as they are nobly following her example in the provision of public libraries and some other good things, the badger will stand for Wisconsin, the turtle for Beloit, and the seal of a wise and steady progress, intellectualized, spiritualized, working upward as well as forward, will stamp all our public affairs.



LIBRARY OF CONGRESS



0 016 098 204 4